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ABSTRACT

To ascertain the audience's perception of the homosexual stereotyped character in reference to the social contact variable, two groups were shown a television situational comedy that depicted two homosexual characters. The two groups, one composed of 45 homosexual and the other of 95 heterosexual college students, were then asked to evaluate the show and the characters' interactions by means of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: background information, including media habits and attitudes; perceptions of the television show and its characters; and information concerning interpersonal relationships. An analysis of the responses revealed that the homosexual sample felt that the homosexual television characters were partially unrepresentative of their culture and that they were stereotyped. Heterosexuals with homosexual social contacts more readily agreed with the homosexuals' evaluation of the stereotypic nature of the television characters than did heterosexuals with no gay social contacts. Both groups of heterosexuals, however, indicated that the characters were partially representative of the homosexual community. The findings also indicated that homosexuals are most offended by stereotypes in general on television, followed by heterosexuals with homosexual social contacts. Those least offended by television stereotypes in general were the heterosexuals with no homosexual social contacts. (FL)

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GROUNDING A STEREOTYPE THEORY:

Reference Group Variable and

the Homosexual Stereotype

by

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Review of the Literature

Since the late 1930s, researchers have been examining the enigmatic conditions surrounding stereotypes. Two theories which are related have been posited: "The Kernel of Truth Theory" and "Just a Shell of Information Theory".[1] These theories indicate stereotyped characteristics offer only a piece of information concerning the subculture in question. The theories also consider stereotyped characteristics a sign, a means of identification, and not an end in itself. Stereotyped attributes are symbolic representations of the culture in question. Stereotyped attributes can be assumed to be the concensus of generalized characteristics that are due to faulty thought processes.[2] These thought processes become perceptual habit[3] and are based on information available to society, concerning the minority or lifestyle in question.[4]

The current problem with stereotyped characters portrayed in the media is the audience's perception of those characters as real or unreal.[5] Are viewers perceiving these stereotyped characters as representative of the respective subculture? Some rationalize the presence of stereotyped characters in the media as "simple", ethnic humor. William Raspberry, a Washington Post columnist, best refutes the ehtnic humor rationalization:

> The mistake is too often made that ethnic jokes are essentially innocent because they amount to nothing more than commentaries on ethnic idiosyncrasies . . . . . When you show that you believe the stereotype to the degree that you make it tough for a man to get a decent job or home or education, don't expect him to laugh at your jokes based on the stereotype.6

Other areas of concern related to the stereotype problem are outlined in the Surgeon General's Report on Television and Social Behavior. The report indicates by the time a child is in first grade, he or she has character and particular show preference.[7] The report also indicates stereotypes appear primarily in situational comedies and action dramas with a majority of young children preferring situational comedies.[8] Some children are able to filter out stereotyped mediated messages due to a reference group. For example, a child can distinguish that all mothers are not like the mother who dusts her furniture while wearing a chiffon gown by observing their own mother engaged in house cleaning activities. Likewise, a black child can observe that black men are not of the caliber of Jack Benny's "Rochester" by observing adult males around them. Concern should be exhibited for children who lack the specific reference groups.[9] As a white child views a black character on television, that child can interpret the black character as being representative of the black culture if the white child does not associate with black children. Some research reveals children can perceive television characters in application to the real world which exemplifies the reference group issue.[10] This discussion of stereotypes recognizes there are impressionable children viewing a medium--television--peppered with stereotypes with no reference group for feedback.

Presently, researchers are attempting to isolate the variable(s) that dictates the audience's perceived authenticity of stereotyped characteristics. John Brigham has found certain segments of society consistently evaluate the character of other segments of society low.[11] Brigham

administered an ethnic character evaluation test (the test evaluated the character of various subcultures: blacks, Italians, Germans, and other ethnic groups) to a group of white subjects. The results indicated non-college whites from rural areas consistently evaluated the character of blacks lower than any other subgroup in the sample. Brigham also noted the Archie Bunker syndrome: those who evaluate one minority low will tend to evaluate other minorities low. Perhaps an explanation for Brigham's findings may be reflected in a study by R. M. Williams: Williams has found that increased social contact among various subcultures within society, lowers ethnic prejudice.[12]

Greenberg has made progress in assimilating fragmented facts in order to begin to develop a theory for explaining the stereotype enigma. Primarily relying on the social contact or reference group variable, Greenberg found that those white children further removed from a particular ethnic group will use television's depiction of those groups in describing that ethnic group.[13] Greenberg discovered this when examining television's depiction of stereotyped black characters.

Current research has examined the effects of stereotyping women, blacks, and other minorities.[14] Due to media hype and the sexual revolution, a concern for the homosexual stereotype has emerged. National statistics estimate that nine percent of the nation's population is gay.[15] The gay community expresses the invalidity of the wrist-flapping feminine gay male stereotype as depicted on television--specifically television situational comedies. In order to solidify Greenberg's and Williams' findings, this research will examine the stereotyped homosexual character as depicted on television.

Developing a stereotype theory that can be utilized in explaining why people believe stereotypes is vital to finding a theory that can be all inclusive among the various stereotypes as depicted on television. All previous literature indicates the reference group variable to be the factor in determining the viewer's perceived authenticity of the stereotyped character. Using the homosexual stereotype, this research tested for the reference group or social contact variable and the quality of that social contact. This research also considered other demographic variables as secondary predictors.

Hypothesis: Those heterosexuals who have had social contact with homosexuals will more likely identify a television stereotype of a homosexual more so than heterosexuals who have had no gay social contacts.

Methodology

To ascertain the audience's perception of the gay stereotyped character in reference to the social contact variable, two groups were shown a popular television situational comedy (see appendix) which depicted two homosexual characters. The two groups were asked, in a twenty-three item close-ended questionnaire designed around the situational comedy, to evaluate the show and the characters' interactions.

The two groups were made up of a homosexual expert group (n = 45) and a group of heterosexual college students (n = 95). The homosexual expert group was utilized to determine if the researcher's perception of a homosexual stereotype was accurate. The homosexual subjects were contacted through the Gay People's Alliance, an Illinois State University student organization, and the University of Illinois' gay student organization, the Gay Illini. The heterosexual group was a random sample

made available through Illinois State University's general education course, The Fundamentals of Speech 110. Four classes were surveyed. The situational comedy had been previously taped on a videotape cassette. The tape was shown to both groups (unedited except for commercials) on a black and white television monitor. After the show, each group was asked to fill out the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections: background information--media habits and attitudes, attitudes and perception of the situational comedy and its characters, and information concerning inter-personal relationships; along with a few basic demographic variables.

Both groups were asked if homosexual characters were present in the show. They were asked to indicate the identity of those characters. Both groups were asked if the gay characters were representative of the gay community as they perceive the gay community. Another question ascertained whether or not the subjects thought the gay characters were stereotyped. The heterosexual groups were asked to evaluate their attitude toward the gay community and the quality and quantity of interactions with gays. The homosexual groups were asked the same questions but in reference to the straight community. All groups were asked to indicate which straight characters' interactions with the gay characters best exemplified and atypified society's general reactions toward the gay community. The entire evaluation process was pre-tested with a group of junior and senior Mass Communication students attending Illinois State University (n = 19). After the pre-test, some wording modifications were made to clear up ambiguity in the questionnaire.

Results

The analysis was conducted through two stages. Initially frequencies were examined to note any general trend in differences of opinion between the homosexual and heterosexual groups. Certain data modifications were made for the second wave of analysis and key variables using oneway ANOVA and t-test statistical tests. Data were significant at $p < .05$.

Media Habits and Attitudes

The two groups differed slightly in media habits. It is evident television is an important source of entertainment for both homosexuals and heterosexuals. A majority of homosexuals (55.1%) and heterosexuals (57.4%) indicated they viewed 3 to 4 hours of television a day. A significant number of respondents from both groups indicated a combination of the print media (Heteros 41%; Gays 51%) as their major information source. The next closest source of information for homosexuals was friends (12%); radio ranked second for the heterosexuals (12%). As major entertainment sources, the heterosexual group chose television (41.4%) and radio (25.3%). The homosexual group's major entertainment source were books (32.7%) and television (24.4%). When asked their opinion toward stereotypes in general depicted on television, the homosexual group responded they were "somewhat" offended (79.6%). Forty percent of the heterosexuals responded with "somewhat" offended while the majority of heterosexuals (52.6%) found stereotypes in general "not at all" offending. Most heteros found stereotypes in general "humorous" (62.1%) while only 20% of the gays thought stereotypes were "humorous". The

plurality of gays (32.7%) found stereotypes in general as seen on television as "not needed".

Perceptions of the Show and the Characters' Interactions

Ninety-five percent of the heterosexuals and all of the homosexuals were able to correctly indicate the two homosexual characters that appeared in the Barney Miller show. The "mannerisms" of the two gay characters were indicated by both groups to be the key to initially identifying the two characters as homosexuals (mannerisms was specified as feminine walk and other feminine gestures). On a 6 point scale (ranging from Highly Representative to Highly Unrepresentative), the plurality of both groups (31.6% heteros; 32.7% gays) thought the homosexual characters were partially representative (3) of the gay community. To determine the stereotypic nature of the two gay characters, a 5 point scale was used (1 = Stereotyped; 5 = Not Stereotyped). Eighty-three percent of the gay sample and 48% of the heterosexual sample thought the characters were stereotyped. Of all the straight characters, Wojo and the Inspector were the most offended by the gay characters and were indicated by both groups to represent society's reactions to the gay community. Barney was indicated by both groups as the straight character that atypifies society's reactions to the gay community (see appendix for character description).

The final stage of frequency analysis indicated 64% of the heterosexual sample "never" associates with the gay community. This gay contact variable was assimilated into an independent variable representing those heterosexuals with gay social contacts (n = 26), heterosexuals with no gay social contacts (n = 52), and the homosexuals. Those heterosexuals

that did not respond to the question asking how often they dealt with the gay community were omitted from the final analysis.

Analysis of Variance Among Heteros with Contact, Heteros without Contact, and Gays

A oneway ANOVA using the gay social contact variable as the independent variable and the 5 point stereotype scale that evaluated the stereotypic nature of the television gays as the dependent variable was conducted to test the hypothesis. The hypothesis was upheld when it was found that heterosexuals who had social contact with the gay community were more likely to identify the television gay characters as stereotyped than those heterosexuals with no gay social contacts (See Tables I and II). Heterosexuals with no social contact's mean score was statistically autonomous from the gay sample.

Oneway analysis of variance was also utilized with the heteros with and without gay social contacts and gays as the independent variable and the 6 point representativeness scale relating to the television gay characters' representativeness of the real gay community, as the dependent variable. The heterosexuals' average mean score (3.48; 3 = partially representative) was shown to be statistically different from the homosexuals' mean score (4.32; 4 = partially unrepresentative) when the least significant differences test was made (See Tables I and II).

When a oneway analysis of variance was made using heteros with and without gay social contacts and gays as the independent variable and the dependent variable relating to attitudes in general toward television stereotypes, it was found through the least-significant differences test

that all three groups' mean scores were statistically different. A lower mean indicated a negative attitude toward stereotypes depicted on television. The gay samples' mean was 1.93, the heterosexuals with gay social contacts, 2.34, and the heterosexuals with no gay social contacts, 2.65 (3 = Not at all offended by stereotypes in general on television; 2 = somewhat offended).

An analysis of variance utilizing the t-test was made between heterosexuals with and those without gay social contacts and the dependent variable measuring the quality of gay social contact when that contact is made. A statistical difference was found to exist between the two groups ($t = -7.88$; 75 df; $p \leq .003$). A lower mean indicates open communication between heteros and gays. Those heterosexuals with social contact scored 2.34 with the heteros with no social contact scoring an average mean of 3.7. (1 = comfortable; 2 = at times uncomfortable; 3 = mostly uncomfortable; 4 = avoidance).

Discussion

Research indicates stereotypes affect people's perception. Greenberg, testing the social contact variable in reference to the audience's perception of the black stereotype, found that those viewers who lacked contact with the black culture will more readily believe television's depiction of this culture. This study supports Greenberg's findings but in reference to the homosexual stereotyped depicted on television.

The gay sample, in evaluating the television gay characters, felt the characters were partially unrepresentative of their culture. The gays also felt the characters were very stereotyped. Those heterosexuals with

gay social contacts more readily agreed with the gays' evaluation of the stereotypic nature of the television gays as compared to heterosexuals with no gay social contacts. Both groups of heterosexuals (with and without gay social contacts) indicated the characters as partially representatitve of the gay community. It was also noted that those heterosexuals with gay social contacts will feel more at ease around gays more so than those heterosexuals with no gay social contacts. Finally, this study indicates homosexuals are most offended by stereotypes in general on television, followed by heterosexuals with gay social contacts who felt somewhat offended by stereotypes. The heterosexuals with no gay social contacts felt the least offended by stereotypes in general as seen on television.

Given the nature of stereotypes found in past research, especially the male homosexual stereotype, this study is added support for the "Kernel of Truth Theory". With the heterosexuals indicating the television gay characters as being partially representative of the gay community and the gay sample indicating partially unrepresentative, both groups concede that stereotyped traits do exist in the homosexual community. The gays indicate this to a lesser degree than the heterosexuals. A small number of gays do assume a stereotype role in their culture.

This research does indicate that experience is the best teacher in learning about subcultures that exist in American society. The majority of heterosexuals with gay social contacts indicate there are gays who do behave in a stereotyped manner but because of their experience with the gay community, will label a television gay as stereotyped. On the other hand, heteros with no gay social contacts indicated that all gays are not

like television gays but at the same time, they are not sure if those television gays are stereotyped. In other words, heterosexuals without gay social contacts cannot recognize a stereotype that is supposed to be recognized as a stereotype. Network comedy series use stereotypes because they are funny and the audience can quickly associate the stereotype with its respective culture. This philosophy of entertainment must be challenged when the stereotype is not being recognized as a stereotype and is merely reinforcing pre-conceived ideas of the viewing audience. It is easy for heterosexuals with gay social contacts to modify their pre-conceived images of the gay male when they are exposed to the gay community. Those heterosexuals with no gay social contacts cannot recognize the stereotype as a stereotype and consequently their perception of the real world is distorted. Ultimately, the consequences are ineffective communication among people.

This research has indicated the reference group or the social contact variable to be the best predictor in explaining why people believe stereotype portrayals. Future research should take into consideration that not necessarily one question can tap a person's perception of a particular phenomena. We should attempt to understand secondary predictors that effect viewer's perception of stereotyped characters. Understanding the secondary predictors as well as the effect of the social contact variable will enable researchers to construct scales that will more accurately measure and predict a viewer's perception of stereotyped characters.

Table 1

Mean Scores of Attitudes Toward Stereotypes, Representativeness of Characters, and Stereotype Scale for Heterosexuals and Homosexuals

Groups	Attitudes toward stereotypes in general on television*	The stereotype nature of the television homosexuals**	The representativeness of the television gays to the gay world***
Heteros with contact (n = 26)	2.3462_{a}	1.68	3.5769_{a}
Heteros with no contact (n = 54)	2.6538_{ab}	1.9298_{ab}	3.3889_{a}
Gays (n = 45)	1.9388	1.25	4.3265
Average among groups	2.315	1.6308	3.782

*Scores ranged from 1 = very much offended to 3 = not at all

**Scores ranged from 1 = very stereotyped to 5 = not stereotyped

***Scores ranged from 1 = highly representative to 6 = highly unrepresentative

[a]Means significantly different from gays

[b]Means of heteros with no contact significantly different from heteros with contact

Table 2

Analysis of Variance Between Attitudes Toward Stereotypes, Representativeness of Characters, Stereotype Scale for Heterosexuals With and Without Gay Social Contact and Homosexuals

Factor	Source	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	Prob.
Opinion of stereotypes in general on television	Between	2	12.9313	6.4657		
	Within	124	42.4700	0.3425	18.878	.0
	Total	126	55.4013			
Representativeness of the television to gay society	Between	2	23.9673	11.9837		
	Within	126	249.9542	1.9338	6.041	.003
	Total	128	273.9214			
The stereotype nature of the television gays	Between	2	12.1176	6.0588		
	Within	127	110.1588	0.8674	6.985	.001
	Total	129	122.2764			

Endnotes

[1]Prothro, E. T. and Melikan, L. H., "Studies in Stereotype Familiarity and the Kernel of Truth Hypothesis," Journal of Social Psychology, 1955, 41, p. 3-10.

[2]Katz, D. and Braly, K. W., "Racial Stereotypes of 100 College Students," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 1933, 28, p. 280-290.

[3]Brigham, J. C., "Ethnic Stereotypes," Psychology Bulletin, 1971, 76, p. 15-38.

[4]Vinacke, W. E., "Stereotypes as Social Concepts," Journal of Social Psychology, 1957, 46, p. 229-243.

[5]Busby, Linda J., "Sex-role Research on the Mass Media," Journal of Communication, Volume 25:4, 1975, p. 107-127.

[6]Raspberry, William, "Who's the Real Bandito?" Washington Post, June 7, 1971, p. A23.

[7]Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, p. 3.

[8]Ibid., p. 10.

[9]Myers, Timothy, "'All in the Family' Impact on Children," Journal of Broadcasting, Winter 1976, p. 24-29.

[10]Himmelweit, H. T., Oppenheim, A. N., and Vince, P., Television and the Child, London: Oxford University Press, 1958.

[11]Brigham, J. C., "Ethnic Stereotypes and Attitudes: A Different Mode of Analysis," Journal of Personality, June, 1973, 41, p. 206-223.

[12]Williams, R. M., Strangers Next Door, Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1964.

[13]Greenberg, Bradley, "Children's Reactions to T.V. Blacks," Journalism Quarterly, 49 (Spring 1972), p. 6-19.

[14]Busby.

[15]Gallup, George, "Public Says Homosexuality More Widespread Today," Daily Pantagraph, July 18, 1977, p. A4.

Appendix

Barney Miller is an ABC production. The weekly comedy series revolves around an inner city detective squad and their interactions with each other and characters they encounter. The episode used in this study was entitled "Quarantine". A prisoner is brought into the precinct for questioning. The prisoner, DePree', is struck ill and a physician quarantines the precinct fearing the prisoner may have small pox. During the doctor's diagnosis, two characters depicting male homosexuals (as it is revealed later in the show) enter. One of the homosexual characters, Marty, has appeared on the show intermittently as the same gay character. Marty is at the precinct to see Barney about his parole. With the entire precinct under quarantine, Marty and his friend, Mr. Driscoe, must spend the night with the detective squad. The remainder of the episode deals with the regular characters interacting or not interacting with Marty and Mr. Driscoe. The following is a brief content analysis of the regular characters' reactions to the gay characters:

1. Barney Miller--Captain of the detectives
   A. Is friendly, helpful and not discriminating toward the homosexuals
   B. Attempts to explain to the inspector that some doctors believe people are homosexuals because of the strong mother/weak father image in the homosexual's family during early childhood

2. Wojo--Young white detective
   A. Initially avoids the homosexuals
   B. Tries to keep the homosexuals from sleeping together because it will "bother" him

3. Harris--Young black detective
   A. Indifferent toward the gay characters
   B. No conversation with the gays

4. Fish--White detective about retirement age
   A. No visible reaction toward the gays and no conversation

5. Yemana--Oriental middle aged detective
   A. Inquiries about Mr. Driscoe's ability to make good coffee
   B. Indifferent toward the gays' sexual preferences

6. The Inspector--Late fifties and white
   A. Objects to the homosexual relationship and discusses his objections with Marty and Mr. Driscoe.
   B. Attempts to relate to the gay characters and Barney that men can have meaningful Platonic relationships